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Effects of process-oriented group supervision as reported by nursing students – a pilot study

Barbro Arvidsson, RNT, PhD, Senior Lecturer, Professor – Ingela Skärsäter, RN, PhD, Senior Lecturer – Bengt Fridlund, RNT, PhD, Professor – Marie-Louise Svensson, RN, PhD, Senior Lecturer – Amir Baigi, MSc(stat), PhD

ABSTRACT

One method to ensure that nursing students are better prepared for their future professional role can be to offer them process-oriented group supervision. The aim of this prospective, longitudinal pilot study was to evaluate the effects of a process-oriented group supervision programme (PGSP) comprising educational, supportive and developmental areas based on reports by nursing students undergoing a 3-year nursing education. The students ($N=61$) evaluated their experiences of the PGSP by means of a questionnaire, which they filled in after each study year. An independent *t*-test was conducted to compare the educational, supportive, and developmental areas after the first (2002), second (2003) and third year (2004) as well as over the whole 3-year study period. The result showed no significant difference in scores in the educational area. However, there was a significant increase in the supportive area ($p=.03$) over the 3-year period, which was especially noticeable during the first year ($p=.013$). There was also an increase in the developmental area over the 3-year period ($p=.021$) as well as during the first year ($p=.024$). Thus, PGSP seems to develop nursing students in their professional identity and personal growth. However, as this was a pilot study, a research implication is to perform a large-scale study over a longer period of time.

KEY WORDS: Effects, Process-oriented group supervision, Nursing education

Background

The great advances in the health sector in recent years have meant that nurses have to be trained for new professional roles. Professional care involves sharing many types of decisions with patients and their relatives (1). In Sweden, nursing has become a knowledge-seeking and evidence-based profession as well as an academic subject in its own right, comprising 3 years of full-time studies leading to a Bachelor's degree comprising 120 credits or 180 ECTS, i.e. the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (2). The transition from student to registered nurse is a complex process, which involves theoretical and practical knowledge, the ability to work in a team as well as personal development (3). Nursing students are novices in the encounter with complex situations in a clinical context. They have a great need both to unburden themselves and for a forum in which they can discuss the relationship between the ideal and the reality (4).

The goal of nursing education should be to guide students in a structured manner with the aim of increasing their sense of control over what they learn, thus leading to empowerment (5). One method for empowering nursing students is to offer them process-oriented group supervision (PGS). PGS encourages the nursing students to reflect upon and analyse problems by posing questions related to situations that the students have experienced during education or clinical practice, a process that is intended to guide the group towards a stronger professional identity (6). The supervisor plays an important role in guiding the process and supporting the development of professional skills among the supervisees (7).

Research-based knowledge of the effects of group supervision in nursing care has clearly increased over the last decade (8). However, previous studies mainly describe supervision from an empirical perspective, with focus on registered nurses in clinical fields. Empirical studies have tried to demonstrate the effects of group supervision on the professional development, personal growth and job satisfaction of nurses (9, 10). PGS has been shown to reduce work-related stress (11, 12) and nurses have also become more open and enthusiastic due to strengthened relationships with their colleagues (13). Furthermore, PGS has been found to have a bearing on aspects such as co-operation among practising clinical nurses (14). Few studies have focused on the effects of PGS perceived by nursing students (15,16). The impact is related to the individual student's maturity and willingness to be invol-

ved with the other group members (15). The nursing students consider reflection as a way of bridging the gap between theory and practice, thereby improving professional and communication skills (16). Lindgren et al. (8) claimed that both structure and climate are important for the success of group supervision. As no longitudinal study has been carried out that focuses on nursing students' experiences of PGS, the aim of this pilot study was to evaluate the effects of such supervision on the supportive, educational and developmental areas as reported by nursing students undergoing a 3-year nursing education.

Design and setting

This prospective longitudinal pilot study was carried out at a university in south west Sweden and included nursing students ($n=61$) who were followed during their 3-year study period in relation to their experiences of PGS. Permission for the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee at Lund University, Sweden, (LU 396 –03), as well as from the Dean of the university involved.

The Process-oriented Group Supervision Programme (PGSP)

Process-oriented group supervision meant that the nursing students were trained to reflect on experiences from both education and clinical practice and to consciously develop a repertoire of examples of work situations, thus gradually increasing their preparedness to act in various care contexts. Based on this reasoning, process-oriented group supervision is a central and essential tool for integrating theoretical and practical knowledge in order to enable an active and adequate learning process. PGS is a process that lasts for a considerable period, and its character can be expected to change over time. In the first year, the main emphasis was on the creation of security and trust within the group by both students and supervisor. In the second, the integration of theory and practice was increasingly emphasised. In the third year, the integration of theory and practice was deepened. The content of the supervision was characterised by increasingly complex care situations based on seeing the patient as a whole person. Process-oriented group supervision took the form of individual supervision within the group, which meant that each supervisee received attention on an alternating basis.

The PGSP was structured as follows: A systematic approach was employed, based on clear rules laid down in a verbally contract be-

Table 1. Baseline demographic characteristics of nursing students (N=61) who participated in a process-oriented group supervision programme during their 3-year nursing education

| | N=61 | % |
|--|------------------|------|
| Mean age (SD; min-max) | 30.5 (7.5;20–49) | |
| Sex, female | 52 | 85.2 |
| Previous experience of healthcare work | 47 | 77 |

tween the supervisor and the nursing students. The contract included structural aspects such as continuity, confidentiality and responsibility as well as aspects related to the climate, for example empathy, support and challenge. The students were requested to consider a situation that had occurred, which they wanted to share and reflect on during PGS. In each session, one of the students was invited to narrate her/his situation, after which the group members questioned the narrator about her/his thoughts and actions, feelings and experiences related to the situation under discussion. The group served as a tool for encouraging reflection, as the students participated in each other's development and had the opportunity to learn from each other. The group consisted of 7–8 students and a supervisor. PGS was an obligatory part of the nursing education and comprised six 90 minute sessions per year. Thus, a total of 18 sessions took place during the 3-year period. For the first two years, the PGSP was led by lecturers, and in the third year by well-trained supervisors working in clinical practice. Apart from the fact that a new supervisor took over after the second year, the composition of the group remained the same. The fact that a new supervisor entered the group led to new questions as well as different approaches to the students' experiences, which facilitated deeper reflection.

Sample

The participants (N=61) were all nursing students who underwent 3 years of PGSP during their study period, see Table 1. All nursing students agreed to participate in the study. There was a wide variation in age, sex, and previous experience of healthcare work. The nursing stu-

Table 2. The content areas and items contained in the process-oriented group supervision questionnaire (PGSQ)

Supportive

I feel safe in the group
I am allowed to be myself in the group
I have confidence in the group
There is a warm atmosphere in the group
There is a sense of solidarity in the group
There is freedom of opinion within the group

Educational

The group supervision focuses on clinical practice in a satisfactory way
The supervisor provides feed-back
The supervisor provides necessary guidance
My own experiences are illuminated at a deeper level
The group supervision focuses on the role of the nurse in a satisfactory way
The supervisor motivates attendance at the supervision sessions

Developmental

The group supervision enhances verbal ability
The group supervision enhances analytical ability
The group supervision enhances social competence
The group supervision enhances reflective ability
The group supervision enhances self-knowledge
I now find it easier to accept criticism

dents comprised nine men and 52 women, whose ages ranged from 20–49. Forty-seven nursing students had previous experience of healthcare work.

Data collection

The questionnaire PGSQ (17) was developed based on a systematic literature review, student expectations with regard to professional skill and personal growth, and the research teams' specific knowledge in the focus of supervision. A 18-item ordinal level questionnaire divided into three areas was designed, using collaborative interrater agreement; i.e. face and content validity were approached by means of negotiated consensus (Göransson et al. 1998). The questionnaire is designed to be self-administered and the ratings are made on an ordinal scale from 1 to 7, where 1 means that the responder strongly disagrees and 7 that the responder strongly agrees. The items concerned pedagogical and supportive tools for reflection and valuation with focus on promoting professional skills development and personal growth. The student had to respond to items like «... focuses on the role of the nurse in a satisfactory way (educational area); «... feel safe in the group» (supportive area) and «... enhances reflective ability» (developmental area) (Table 2).

The internal consistency reliability (using Cronbach's alpha co-efficient) was repeated three times, after each study year; T¹, T², and T³. Cronbach's alpha co-efficient for the entire questionnaire at T³ was 0.89 and for each of the subscales; 0.91 (educational), 0.89 (supportive) and 0.90 (developmental) (17). Furthermore, the questionnaire included three items of a socio-demographic character (age, sex and previous experience of healthcare work).

Procedure

The first researcher gave each nursing student a letter explaining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation and the confidentiality of the data. They also received oral information, which was repeated after each study year. The students were asked to evaluate their experiences of PGSP by means of the PGSQ after each year of study (2002, 2003 and 2004), thus on three occasions in all. The questionnaire was distributed in the classroom by the first researcher after each study year. The nursing students answered the questionnaire in the class-room, where the students completed it, a task that required less than 15 minutes. The first researcher was aware that any help given to the students when answering the questionnaire had to be impartial in order to avoid bias in the responses.

Data analysis

Student's t-test was conducted to compare the educational, supportive, and developmental areas within the 1-year follow-up (after the first, second and third year) as well as over the whole study period. $P < .05$, two-sided test, was considered statistically significant. All data were analysed using SPSS 14.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA).

Results

The results showed an increased positive effect as a result of supervision in two of the three areas. As can be seen in Table 3, there was no significant difference in scores in the educational area, either over the 3-year period or during the first year. There was a significant increase in the supportive area ($p=.03$) over the 3-year period, which was especially noticeable during the first year ($p=.013$). There was also an increase in the developmental area over the 3-year period ($p=.021$) as well as during the first year ($p=.024$).

Methodological issues

Several methodological issues have to be taken into account. First, although this study was prospective and longitudinal, it was nevertheless a pilot study, and a larger number of nursing students would be

Table 3. Effects on educational, supportive and developmental areas reported by the nursing students (N=61) who participated in a process-oriented group supervision programme in the course of their 3-year nursing education

| Areas | n | Mean (SD) | | n | Mean (SD) | | n | Mean (SD) | T ₁ -T ₂ | T ₁ -T ₃ |
|---------------|----|----------------|----|------------|----------------|------------|---|--------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| | | T ₁ | n | | T ₂ | n | | | T ₃ | p-value |
| Educational | 60 | 30.8 (9.2) | 61 | 30.7 (9.6) | 61 | 33.0 (8.6) | | 0.964 | 0.171 | |
| Supportive | 61 | 35.1 (5.5) | 61 | 37.5 (4.9) | 61 | 37.2 (4.7) | | 0.013 | 0.03 | |
| Developmental | 59 | 22.8 (8.4) | 61 | 26.2 (8.0) | 61 | 26.3 (8.1) | | 0.024 | 0.021 | |

T₁ = baseline; after year one; T₂ = after year two; T₃ = after year three
T₁-T₂ = year 1-2; T₁-T₃ year 1-3 follow-up using Student's t-test.

required in order to generalise the findings. Second, longitudinal studies entail a risk of dropout as a result of the duration of the intervention. However, there was no external dropout in this study, possibly due to the fact that all nursing students agreed to participate in the study and answered the questionnaire within the classroom environment. Third, the selection criteria were appropriate, as all students engaged in the 3-year course of full-time studies leading to a Bachelor's degree in nursing participated in the intervention. Fourth, a weakness lies in the lack of a control group, which can threaten internal validity. Fifth, the PGSQ seems to be reliable due to the high internal consistency of the reliability scores as well as the ease of administering and answering the instrument due to the small number of items.

Process-oriented group supervision issues

Students who embark on higher education find themselves in a new and unfamiliar situation. They have to adapt to a new way of learning, and their ability for reflection and critical analysis becomes important (18). Reflective sessions offer students a means to develop their problem solving abilities, critical thinking skills as well as their self-awareness (19).

The result revealed no significant difference in scores in the *educational area* over the 3-year period. From the start, the supervisor's duty is to guide the nursing students towards group responsibility and invite them, by means of questions, to take the initiative and share thoughts and feelings related to problems and issues that arise in the group. The general consensus is that a bottom-up approach takes place in PGS, where ownership of the process belongs to the nursing student. The nursing student is given the opportunity to problematise and explore her/his self-experienced situation with the support of the group members. Other factors relevant to supervision can be described in terms of personal characteristics that build on the relationship and communication between supervisor and students (20). Studies by White et al. and Scanlon & Weir (13, 21) highlight the fact that nurses found it difficult to make time for supervision and that supervision took time away from the patients. It is worth considering whether the nursing students and their supervisors experienced the same thing, namely that PGS sometimes took time away from other educational activities. Likewise, not having sufficient time to prepare for supervision makes it difficult to remain up to date and to meet the needs of the nursing students.

However, the result demonstrated that the nursing students experienced a *supportive* atmosphere during the process-oriented group supervision sessions. A prerequisite for having the courage to share difficult experiences is that the participants have confidence and trust in each other (10). Lack of trust is a hindrance to the development of a favourable supervision climate and leads to a feeling of being scrutinized as well as fear of exposing oneself (7). When the solution to a problem becomes the task of the whole group, it increases the sense of unity and inspires a feeling of belonging, thus contributing to a perception of safety. The feeling of having sufficient competence to control the situation is the most important factor for reducing stress and enhancing personal well being (22). The result shows that the *developmental area* increased significantly over the 3-year period. PGS is a

process conducted over a long period of time and its character is expected to change as time goes by. Reflecting together with others facilitates the transformation of the student's knowledge from situational and individual experiences to a more general perspective. This implies a clear emphasis on professional aspects and can contribute to the students acquiring an increased knowledge of nursing. It is important for nursing students to strengthen their professional identity, as it allows them to gain a deeper

understanding of their future professional duties (15). Their self-esteem is enhanced when they realise that their knowledge can be used to deal with new situations, thus leading to a stronger development of their identity and a perception of themselves as future nurses (3).

Consequently, the principal goal of using PGS as method is to provide nursing students with an opportunity to develop problem solving abilities, critical thinking skills, self awareness as well as allowing them to gain a deeper understanding of their future professional duties (15). The objective is to provide supervision that is reflective and that can contribute to the development of reflective practitioners (23).

Conclusion and implications

Process-oriented group supervision is about providing support for nursing students and developing their personal and professional competence. It is an active process, which requires input from both supervisor and nursing students. The results show no significant difference in scores in the educational area. There was, however, a significant increase in the supportive and development areas over the 3-year period, which was especially noticeable during the first year. Thus, PGSP seems to develop nursing students in their professional identity and personal growth. The findings have strengthened the argument for the use of a PGSP in nursing education. As this was a pilot study, an important research implication is to perform a large-scale study over a longer period of time.

Barbro Arvidsson, RNT, PhD, Senior Lecturer, Professor (1,2), Ingela Skärsäter, RN, PhD, Senior Lecturer (3), Bengt Fridlund, RNT, PhD, Professor (5),

* Marie-Louise Svensson, RN, PhD, Senior Lecturer (1) and Amir Baigi, MSc(stat), PhD (4)

(1) School of Social and Health Sciences, Halmstad University, Halmstad, Sweden

(2) Faculty of Health and Caring Sciences, Gjøvik University, Gjøvik, Norway

(3) The Sahlgrenska Academy at Göteborg University, Institute of Health and Care Science, Göteborg, Sweden

(4) The Sahlgrenska Academy at Göteborg University, Department of Primary Health Care, Göteborg, Sweden

(5) School of Health Sciences and Social Work, Växjö University, Växjö, Sweden

Corresponding author: Barbro Arvidsson, School of Social and Health Sciences,

Halmstad University, POBox 823, SE 301 18 Halmstad, SWEDEN
barbro.arvidsson@hos.hh.se

* Who died in August 2006

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